

**LUST AND VIOLENCE IN THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ANDRONICUS
I COMNENUS,
EMPEROR OF THE ROMANSⁱ**

The general impression of the Byzantine period that some may have formed is of a civilisation which was obsessed with religious dogma and the performance of complex rituals under the stern eye of Christ the All-Powerful, remarkable also for the complexity of its administrative processes and the ferocity of its political and dynastic plotting. Our present civilisation is less concerned with the rituals and dogmas of religion, but in other respects we have something in common with these later Romans. Indeed, the story that I am about to tell is one that could be set in any period. It is a tale of fleshly lust and greed for power, and of success followed swiftly by destruction. It has picaresque elements, and falls somewhere in the limbo between melodrama and tragedy.

Let me name the principal characters. Manuel Comnenus was Emperor of the Romans for 43 years from 1137 to 1180. In his reign the East Roman world was caught between the Turks and the Arabs on one side and the western European powers on the other. He attempted to protect his empire by diplomatic negotiations, by making war when these failed, and by arranging dynastic marriages for himself and his family, with brides and bridegrooms from European courts.

Manuel's cousin Andronicus Comnenus was a few years older, and they grew up together. Their relationship was based, at least on Manuel's side, on the friendship that he felt for a close relative. But the consuming passion of Andronicus's life, passing even the love of women, was to make himself emperor even if this meant removing anyone who stood in his way. It took him sixty-three years.

Manuel's second wife, the Frankish princess Maria of Antioch, was not a Greek, as the name of Xéne or 'foreigner', which she was given at the time of her marriage, shows. The marriage was, as so often, arranged for reasons of policy. He also hoped that she would give him a son, which his first wife had failed to do.

A son was born to them, and was named Alexius after the first Comnenian emperor. He became emperor, with his mother as guardian, soon after his eleventh birthday, and died at the age of fourteen. During the last years of Manuel's life a marriage was arranged between the young prince and the even younger daughter of the King of France. This Agnes, of whom no portrait survives, was renamed Anna on her arrival at Constantinople, and after the death of Alexius she was married to his successor Andronicus, who was more than fifty years older.

We also lack portraits of three other imperial ladies, with more fully ripened charms, who at one time or another lavished their favours upon Andronicus. These were Eudocia, a niece of the emperor Manuel, Philippa of Antioch, sister of the Maria whom Manuel had married and therefore the emperor's sister-in-law, and Theodora, another niece of Manuel's. By all accounts they were beautiful. But they were also all closely related to the emperor, and this made them even more attractive.

Our last two characters are men again. William II was the Norman king of Sicily. You see him here in a mosaic in his great cathedral at Palermo, offering the building to the Virgin Mary. He was eager to increase his power and extend his dominions.

The last principal character is Andronicus's successor, Isaac Angelus (or Angelus-Comnenus as he is sometimes known, since he was related to the Comnenian family). I will tell you the story of his accession later, and mention two incidents in which he played a part during Andronicus's reign.

We owe most of our knowledge of this period to three writers. The first is John Cinnamus, whose historical account of the events of the reigns of John Comnenus and Manuel Comnenus (up to 1176) is our main source for the events of Andronicus's early life. The next, Eustathius, was a priest who rose to become a professor of rhetoric at Constantinople and was then appointed to the position of archbishop of Thessalonica. He has long been venerated as a saint in that area, and in 1988 the Greek Church officially canonised him. He is best known to classicists as the author of lengthy commentaries on the Homeric poems. Many of his theological and rhetorical works also survive, and he wrote an account of the capture of Thessalonica in 1185 by the Normans of Sicily. The introductory section of this work contains a brief but graphic account of the time when Andronicus managed to seize power.

Slightly later in date is the historian Nicetas Choniates. He was a public servant who resigned his position and went off to study law when Andronicus became emperor, later writing his *Historia*, which gave an account of events up to the time of the Fourth Crusade. He was not an admirer of Andronicus, but gave him credit where credit was due.

Let us begin this account in the year 1180. The emperor Manuel lay upon his deathbed raging with fever, while the patriarch of Constantinople begged him to make his soul, and to confirm arrangements to protect the young son, only eleven years old, whom he was leaving behind him. Manuel, however, was cheerful. He knew that it was written in the stars that he had a full fourteen years more to live, and his astrologers had even assured him that once he had recovered from this temporary indisposition, Venus would again be in the ascendant for him. They were wrong, doubly wrong, and he passed away, leaving the young Alexius to succeed him.

The history of Manuel's marriages and of his children is as follows. In 1146, three years after his accession to the throne, he married Bertha of Sulzbach, to fortify the alliance with Germany that he had made against the Norman kingdom

which then controlled southern Italy and Sicily. Following the common custom, Bertha abandoned her foreign name and took the Greek name of Irene. She was a woman of many virtues, who tried to live in harmony with her husband. This, however, did not keep Manuel faithful to her, and after some relatively brief affairs he entered into a relationship with his niece Theodora, who soon began to receive the most obvious marks of honour. She was accompanied by a large entourage, and given a costume and adornments almost equivalent to those of the legitimate empress. When she arranged to have a rival for the emperor's favours assassinated, she escaped punishment, and gifts were lavished upon her, and upon the son whom she bore, with a prodigal hand.

Marriage with Theodora was impossible because of the closeness of their relationship, and her son could not succeed to the throne. So when Bertha-Irene died after thirteen years of marriage, having given him only a daughter, Manuel hastened to find another empress, one who might give him a legitimate son. The emperor's emissaries looked for a suitable candidate, and found Maria of Antioch, whose charms they described to the emperor as equal to those of Aphrodite, Juno and Helen of Troy.

In 1161 therefore their nuptials were celebrated in the Great Church of Constantinople, Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom built by Justinian I six centuries before.

A portrait of the couple survives. Manuel was shaved for the occasion. Do not be surprised at the haloes that the bride and bridegroom wear. Roman emperors are sometimes represented nimbate in art, a practice which can be traced back as far as the reign of Antoninus Pius. Maria, as has been mentioned, now took the Greek name of Xéne. The marriage was fruitful after eight years, when she presented her husband with his only legitimate male offspring, who was named Alexius in the hope that he would repeat the triumphs of the first emperor to bear that name.

We shall meet the unfortunate Maria of Antioch and her son Alexius again soon, but now it is time to look at Manuel's cousin. The portrait of Andronicus Comnenus that you see before you does not do him justice, because it shows him in the last years of his life, after he had become emperor. He was physically an impressive figure. Six feet in height, strong and accomplished in all physical activities, he had a remarkable record of resistance to fatigue and disease even in the most unfavourable circumstances. He also exhibited a lively intelligence and a ready wit in his conversation. There can be no doubt of his popularity in his earlier years, and there are two most convincing proofs of the charm that he was able to exert. His cousin the emperor time and time again refrained from punishing him as harshly as he would have punished others who committed similar offences, and his first wife, to whom he was consistently unfaithful, seems never to have allowed such episodes to prevent her from continuing to adore him.

Unfortunately these attractions were counterbalanced by less desirable qualities. His most salient characteristic, both in his private and in his public life, was to assume that whatever he wanted must be his, or must be done, without regard for the consequences. In addition, he was not restrained by any of the religious or moral scruples that one would consider generally acceptable, and conspiracy, betrayal and perjury seemed to him to be the natural means of achieving his boundless ambitions. Even when young he aspired to the imperial throne, and he never relinquished this dream until he succeeded in gaining it. We might even believe that if he had known that death would be the price of his ambition, this would not have deterred him.

Little information survives about the first thirty years of Andronicus's life. He was of approximately the same age as Manuel, who became emperor at the age of twenty-three, and was brought up together with him; the memory of shared escapades of their youth may explain the extraordinary leniency of Manuel towards his cousin in later days.

The first eight years of Manuel's reign passed without notable problems. Andronicus was married, and although we do not know his wife's name, later events make it clear that she was devoted to him. She had borne him a son, whom he called Manuel, and a daughter, Maria. In 1151, however, when he was about thirty years old, he involved himself in an affair which caused a scandal at the court. The emperor Manuel had, as has already been mentioned, taken as his mistress his niece Theodora, and now Andronicus entered into a similar relationship with Theodora's sister Eudocia, who had been widowed at an early age. The lady's family was scandalised by the situation, but Andronicus reacted to any complaints which reached his ears with cheerful scorn. It was only fitting, he said, that a subject should follow the example set by his master; besides, his relationship was being conducted with one who was only a second cousin, while the emperor was bedding his own brother's daughter.

It must have been at least partly for this reason that Manuel decided that Andronicus must be removed from court. In 1152, therefore, he sent him five hundred miles away to Cilicia, to wage war against the Armenian prince Thorus. The expedition was a failure. Andronicus distinguished himself in battle, but after a while was forced to retreat, and was recalled to Constantinople.

He was then given another command on the Hungarian frontier, but this was terminated when the emperor discovered that he had been conducting an intrigue with the king of Hungary with the object of overthrowing his cousin, and was even rumoured to be planning to assassinate him. Such was Manuel's indulgence that the only further penalty that he visited on Andronicus was to strip him of the governorships of Belgrade and Brainitzova with which he had recently invested him, and then to bring him to Pelagonia in Macedonia, where the imperial court was in residence, in the hope that he would stay out of trouble if watched more closely. This, however, was the reverse of a punishment, since Andronicus now found himself once more within range of the fair Eudocia, with whom he lost no time in renewing his former relationship.

An event followed which was characteristic of him. Eudocia's brother and brother-in-law, enraged at the way in which their family's good name was being brought into disrepute, decided to assassinate the man who was the cause of this. The court was in temporary accommodation, and one day, when Andronicus was spending a few hours in his mistress's tent, her relatives posted a band of armed men nearby, to kill him when he came out, hoping to catch him in a moment of weakness. But news of the plot was transmitted to Eudocia and although, as Nicetas tells us, the information reached her at a moment when she had her mind on other matters, she was able to warn her lover, and propose a course of action. She suggested that she should call one of her maid-servants to her from outside the tent, and that Andronicus should then put on female clothing and make his escape, pretending to be the same servant going on an errand. The ruse was of a kind that appealed to her lover's agile mind, but he rejected it. He might have felt that it would be impossible to conceal the sudden increase in height of the supposed maidservant, but he also feared that even if the trick were successful, he would be subjected to ridicule afterwards, and he was not prepared to face this. So with a sudden stroke of his sword he cut a great gash in the side of the tent, leaped through it, and was away before his would-be assassins realised what was happening.

Another source tells us that at this time Andronicus made two attempts to bring about the death of the emperor. This may be only a slander spread by his enemies, but whether it is true or not, Manuel now decided that it was no longer safe to have his rival free, and had him taken to Constantinople and imprisoned in the imperial palace. This happened in 1155, when Andronicus was about thirty-five years old, and he stayed a prisoner for nine years altogether.

Being the man he was, he thought only of escape, and on two occasions he managed to break free. When he had been in prison for three years, he noticed that a disused drain passed beneath the tower of the palace in which he was imprisoned, and he managed to excavate an entry to it. Then one day he slipped

inside, arranging things so that there was no sign that anyone had passed that way. When dinner time arrived, he was gone, and there was no evidence left to show how this had happened.

Manuel was at this time campaigning in Cilicia. The authorities in Constantinople were enormously embarrassed by the disappearance of their prisoner, and the hunt began at once. The gates of the city were closed, ships along the sea walls and in the Golden Horn were boarded and searched, and there was an investigation of all possible places of hiding inside the walls. Messengers were sent in all directions with warrants for his arrest. In addition, Andronicus's wife was immediately placed under detention in the very cell that had held her husband, so that she might not escape with him; she was, like everyone else, unconscious of the fact that he was only a few feet beneath her.

Darkness fell, and in the stillness of the night Andronicus resurrected himself. His wife was at first terrified out of her wits, believing the dusty figure which appeared before her to be his ghost, but it was not long before she received convincing proof that her husband did indeed stand before her in the flesh; in fact, nine months later, Andronicus became the father of a second son, who was called John or Ioannes. The reunion lasted for a week, with our hero, like a male Persephone, spending half his time above the earth and the other half in the realms of Hades. Then, when the vigilance of the guards around the palace had been relaxed a little, Andronicus was able to slip past them and leave the city. He headed into Asia, but here his luck deserted him. He was recognised and captured, and taken back to Constantinople.

It was nearly six years before he managed to get free again. By 1164 the conditions of imprisonment had been relaxed a little, and he was allowed to have the services of a young lad who was charged with the duty of bringing him his food, and a ration of wine for medicinal purposes. Andronicus used the lad to obtain an impression in wax of the key of his prison cell, which was delivered to

his ever-faithful wife and used to make a copy. At the same time a rope was smuggled in to him in one of the jars in which his wine was delivered.

Then one night his page unlocked the door of the cell. Andronicus made his way to the battlements of the palace, tied his rope around a merlon and slid to the ground. It had been arranged that a vessel should be waiting nearby on the banks of the Golden Horn, but now he had a narrow escape from disaster. No one had remembered that there was a regular patrol of guards along the side of the palace that faced the water, and as luck would have it, they arrived at this time. His quick wits, however, came at once to his aid. He rushed up to the soldiers who made up the patrol and begged for their assistance. 'Help me!' he cried. 'I am a slave, and I have just escaped from prison. Do not let me fall into the hands of my master; he will punish me very harshly.' The story was easy to believe, because he was still wearing the fetters of a prisoner; he took care to mangle his Greek like a barbarian; and at the same time the captain of the ship which was waiting to rescue him added verisimilitude to the story by rushing up, claiming that Andronicus belonged to him, and demanding that his property should be returned. The soldiers found the situation amusing and immediately released the supposed runaway to the mercies of his master, laughing at the thought of the penalties that he would suffer.

So Andronicus escaped from Constantinople, and before long he had reached Anchialus on the western coast of the Black Sea. The governor of that city was someone to whom he had done a good turn in the past, so he was able to obtain money and guides, his intention being to go further and take refuge with a Russian prince named Jaroslav. But alas, when he was only a little distant from the border he was recognised by some shepherds as the man for whose arrest warrants had been issued, detained by them and handed over once again to the emperor's men.

Another man might have given up hope at this point, but not Andronicus. Although well guarded he devised a means of escape by pretending to be

afflicted by the malady that so often strikes travellers in strange lands, and feigned the necessity to dismount from his horse from time to time and remove himself a short distance from the road. By nightfall his guards had become accustomed to this routine, observing it with careless amusement, and then he seized the opportunity for which he had been waiting. Dismounting as usual he retired a little distance, and in the dusk arranged his cloak and hat upon a stick planted in the ground, so that they resembled a squatting figure; then creeping on his belly like a snake, he vanished into the gloom. By the time the ruse was discovered, he had gone, and after a few days was able to make his way across the border, where he was hospitably received by Prince Jaroslav, who was glad to make use of him as an adviser in affairs of state, and made a personal companion of him, lodging him in his own dwelling and inviting him to dine at his own table.

When news of this situation reached Manuel, he was on the point of marching westwards to open a campaign in Hungary, and the thought of leaving Andronicus on the Russian border, nearer to Constantinople than he himself was, must have been unattractive. He therefore thought it wiser to pardon his cousin, and promised that if he returned, his liberty and safety would be guaranteed. An added factor may have been that the Eudocia affair was nine years in the past, and besides, the lady had now been married again, to a successful military man by the name of Michael Gavras, so there was less chance of scandal in that quarter.

Andronicus accepted the offer, returned, and as if to show that for the time being he intended to be loyal, played a distinguished part in the siege of Zeugminon north of Belgrade on the Hungarian border. Soon after, however, his individuality reasserted itself. Manuel, who at that time had a daughter but as yet no son, decided to arrange a dynastic marriage, which might give him a male heir, between his daughter and Prince Bela of Hungary, whose name was changed to Alexius to make him a proper member of the imperial family. The

engagement was announced, but Andronicus refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the new heirs. It would, he said, be shameful for the Romans to be governed by someone of foreign blood, and besides, Manuel himself was not yet too old to hope for a male heir. The back-handed compliment may or may not have pleased the emperor, but in fact it turned out to be prophetic: within a few years he did find himself the father of a son, the future Alexius II.

But before this happened Manuel had decided that it would be better if Andronicus were away from the court. So once again our hero was sent to Cilicia to wage war against his old opponent the Armenian ruler Thorus. Not surprisingly, the result was the same as before: although on some occasions he distinguished himself in battle, his negligence in the administration of his command led to his being unsuccessful.

In addition, he now found an enterprise more to his liking. The whole of the Levant was buzzing with stories of the charms of Philippa of Antioch, a princess who in addition to being endowed with a remarkable beauty was also a younger sister of Manuel's empress. This was too much for Andronicus to resist. He gave up the Cilician campaign and hastened to Syria, where he laid siege to the lady according to the best conventions. He paraded beneath her window wearing his finest clothing, boots and tunic made according to the latest fashion and crafted to show off his manly form, and taking with him an escort of pretty blond boys bearing silver bows. His reputation and his presence made up for the ravages which half a century had worked upon his features, and so, although more than twenty years separated them, Philippa yielded and promised to be his bride (he was by that time a widower).

When the news reached Constantinople Manuel's rage was all that might have been expected. At once he sent a new governor to Cilicia, one Constantine Kalamanos, who was charged with the twin assignments of replacing Andronicus in his command and, if possible, supplanting him in the affections of Philippa. But the young lady would have none of him. At first she would not

even admit him into her presence, and when she did, it was only to make jests at his expense, comparing his short stature unfavourably with Andronicus's majestic height, and his lack of nobility with the splendid lineage of her beloved. So Manuel's emissary, although younger, was forced to admit defeat, while the princess became increasingly smitten with her mature lover.

Disappointment, however, lay in store for her, because after a few more weeks of dalliance Andronicus grew weary of her; or perhaps he made a prudent analysis of his situation, financial and otherwise, now that imperial support had been withdrawn. At any rate, whatever his primary reason may have been, he left for Jerusalem, taking with him what remained of the funds that had been given to him for the conduct of his official assignment. Philippa was left desolate, and her end was a sad one. She remained single for nearly ten years, and was then married to the Constable of Jerusalem, Humphrey de Toron, an elderly invalid, after which she promptly went into a decline and died.

Meanwhile Andronicus, his vigour reinforced by this episode, had reached Jerusalem and was hospitably received by its Frankish rulers. Further joys awaited him there, since he found resident in the city a Byzantine princess, Theodora, another niece of the emperor Manuel. This Theodora had been married at the age of thirteen to Baldwin III, king of Jerusalem, had been widowed at seventeen and had now reached the full ripeness of twenty-two years. She was within the prohibited degrees of kinship, but this, as in the case of Eudocia, did not discourage Andronicus, who was immediately inflamed with passion for her. His passion was returned, and there now began a most remarkable romance. It started at Acre, where Theodora was the hostess. Then Andronicus received her at Beyrouth, which Amaury the new king of Jerusalem gave him as a fief.

The news of the latest family affair reached Manuel in Constantinople. On this occasion he ceased to be charitable towards his cousin, and gave orders that Andronicus was to be arrested and blinded (a form of punishment which was

popular in the Byzantine world, since it rendered political opponents impotent, while avoiding problems of a religious nature such as might be created by killing those who had committed no actual crime; if done skilfully, it could even be managed without shedding blood, by the skilful placing of white hot irons close to the eyeballs). Luckily for Andronicus, a copy of the imperial dispatch found its way in Theodora's hands, and the two lovers decided to seek safety in other lands rather than part.

Now began a period in our hero's life when he showed what was for him a remarkable constancy, since Theodora lasted him for about twelve years. With nothing but his wits and his reputation to aid him he wandered from place to place on the fringes of the Moslem world, seeming to find a welcome wherever he went, although none of the rulers who showed him hospitality was willing to grant him more than temporary residence for fear of inviting reprisals from the emperor in Constantinople. So he moved from Damascus to Harran to Baghdad, to Mardin and Ezerum, to the Georgian kingdom of Iberia and to the Chaldaean Turks, and in this last area, on the southern shores of the Black Sea, he was given permission to settle by the Turkish ruler, and granted the occupation of a fortress near the boundary which marked the beginning of Byzantine territory. He repaid the hospitality of his patron by indulging in the occasional raid across the border and taking Roman prisoners whom he sold into slavery, and in this fashion he survived for several years, managing to avoid the attempts to recapture him which were made from time to time by the agents of the infuriated Manuel.

Theodora was his companion during this period, and not only Theodora, but his son John or Ioannes who had been conceived in prison in 1158 and was now reaching manhood; and as time went by a little Alexius and a little Irene arrived to swell their company. But after several more years had passed, this amatory idyll was interrupted, because Theodora and their children were taken prisoner by the Byzantine duke of Trebizond, Nicephorus Palaeologus. This was too

much for Andronicus. Life without his Theodora was unbearable, and he decided to give Manuel best, in the hope of rejoining his mistress and their children.

There was an exchange of messages: the emperor promised his errant cousin safe conduct and the errant cousin promised to mend his ways. Andronicus returned to Constantinople, where he entered the imperial presence with a typical theatrical gesture. He had wound an iron chain around his body beneath his clothing, and without revealing this he threw himself to the floor in the emperor's audience chamber. Then when Manuel, weeping with emotion, bade him rise, he began to unwind the chain, commanding those around him to drag him like a captive to the very foot of the throne. The man who took up the offer was a certain Isaac Angelus, of whom we shall hear more. The dramatic scene did Andronicus no harm. He was given a prodigal's welcome, and although Manuel was wise enough not to allow him to reside again in the capital, a comfortable exile was arranged for him as the governor of Oenaeum, a city on the southern coast of the Black Sea. We must presume that Theodora was allowed to accompany him there, although no chronicler actually tells us so.

For the next few years we hear little of Andronicus. But even when he had passed his sixtieth year, his ambitions were not laid to rest, and the death of Manuel in 1180 reawakened them.

The new emperor, Manuel's son Alexius, was only eleven years old. He was inexperienced in government, and had until this time shown no aptitude for anything but childish sports.

His mother, Xéne, formerly Maria of Antioch, sister of the unfortunate Philippa, governed as regent. She was the first person of Latin blood to rule at Constantinople, and it needed no more than this to make her unpopular with the Greek portion of the population of that city. Her late husband had encouraged westerners, and during his reign an increasing part of the rich trade of the empire had fallen into the hands of Frankish and Italian merchants. Maria-Xene's

policies were a continuation rather than an extension of her late husband's, but because she was not Greek, and perhaps because she was a woman, the dissatisfaction that they caused was doubled.

She had also made the mistake of taking as her most favoured adviser an elegant noble, another Alexius Comnenus, a Roman, but one with extreme pro-western sympathies. Naturally enough, rumour at once made them lovers: as Eustathius put it, encapsulating what in Thessalonica could have been no more than gossip from afar, 'many aimed the arrows of their desire at her, but the shaft of Alexius outstripped all the rest'. Manuel had dignified Alexius with the rank of Protosebastus or 'First Augustus', this being about half way up the increasingly inflated system of titulature which the Comnenian emperors had developed as a means of putting their relatives and favourites upon the imperial payroll. The titles, like those that have been devised in the last generation for senior university managers, ranged from the simple Sebastus to the highest one, Panhyperprotosebastus, literally 'Overall First Augustus'. Our contemporary sources usually refer to him simply as the Protosebastus. It is not surprising that although when Manuel was alive Maria-Xene seems to have been accepted by the people of Constantinople, she was now hated, and her new name of Xéne, 'the Foreigner' was used as a way of attacking her, which it had not been in the first place. We may make a comparison with the later Marie-Antoinette of France, who came increasingly to be known in her later years as 'the Austrian woman'.

In less than two years the general discontent led to an incident of some seriousness. Manuel's daughter by his first marriage, another Mary or Maria, had been married to a western princeling, Renier of Montferrat, after the proposed marriage with Bela of Hungary failed to go ahead. The two of them were naturally not inclined to support Manuel's second wife, and hatched a plot, which was discovered even while it was being planned. The conspirators and some of their supporters then raced to the Church of the Holy Wisdom, Hagia

Sophia, and barricaded themselves within it. Whether they were treating the building as a sanctuary or as a fortress is not clear, but the result was the same: the government was in a difficult situation. The Greek population of Constantinople was solidly in favour of the conspirators, and in addition the patriarch Theodosius, and the clergy as a whole, were on their side. Soldiers were sent to rout the conspirators out of the Great Church. There was fighting in the holy place - a great scandal in a city so devoted to the forms of religion - and the Patriarch had to intervene. An amnesty was granted to the conspirators (a sign of weakness), and then, in an attempt to demonstrate that they were in control of events, the emperor's mother, acting as regent, together with the Protosebastus, exiled the patriarch to a monastery. This was a mistake. The city was immediately crowded with hostile demonstrations and it was not long before Theodosius was brought back and led in triumph through the streets of Constantinople, with the cheers of the crowd and the joyful smoke of incense symbolising the defeat of the temporal by the everlasting powers.

These goings-on became known to Andronicus. The time had come, as it so often does, when the government was in disrepute and the people were looking for a saviour, any saviour. Prophecies were beginning to be heard that he would be the next emperor, and these were treated seriously by many in Constantinople, who would have seen him as representing the established dynasty and established traditions rather than domination by a foreigner. The news from the capital was so satisfactory that Andronicus gathered together such troops as he could muster and set out along the coast of the Black Sea for Constantinople. When he reached it he encamped on the other side of the Bosphorus, announcing that he had come to the aid of the emperor Alexius.

Inflated reports of the size and condition of his forces had reached the city, and the soldiers who were sent to stop him refused to fight. It was not long before a great stream of Greeks of all classes was crossing the Bosphorus to pay him homage, their enthusiasm so kindled by his presence that they failed to

notice how small his army was, how few his ships and how poorly he was prepared for serious warfare. As Eustathius sarcastically reports, 'His former popularity persuaded them to desire him now, believing that by simply appearing he would ensure that all would be well for them. Their mouths vomited forth praises of every kind, they repeatedly cried, 'Glory to God!' and they summoned him to join them in Constantinople at once, as if it were possible for him to leap across the narrows in an instant; no doubt the natural swift-footedness of the man was responsible for suggesting this idea to them.'

So Andronicus entered the city through the Golden Gate in the manner of a victor. The demands that he made on behalf of the young emperor whom he had come to protect were at first modest. He insisted only that Maria-Xene should retire to a monastery, that the Protosebastus should be removed, and that all the powers of government should be placed in the hands of Alexius. If he had been faced with a determined and well-organised opposition, supported by the Latins resident in Constantinople, his position would not have been easy to sustain, but the Protosebastus decided not to make a fight for it, and he was soon arrested, blinded as a precaution against further activity on his part, and left to his own devices thereafter. This quiet and merciful beginning to Andronicus's period of power did not, however, set the tone for what followed, because it was succeeded by a massacre of the Latin inhabitants of the city, principally Genoese and Venetians. Hardly any escaped; even women, children and the old were butchered by the Greeks, who were venting a hatred which had been accumulating for a long time.

The massacre of the Latins in 1182, which was, if not actively encouraged by Andronicus, at least not resisted, was one of the things that led to his downfall. But for the moment his star was in the ascendant. He could present himself in Constantinople as the protector of the young emperor and as the liberator of the Greeks from foreign oppression. He was the object of almost universal enthusiasm and flattery, 'lightening their darkness with a starry radiance' and so

on. In only one quarter was there any potentially dangerous opposition, and this took the form of suspicion rather than an outright challenge. Theodosius the patriarch of Constantinople was the official guardian of the young emperor, and was not disposed to put much faith in the protestations of loyalty and affection that Andronicus was now heaping on Alexius. Andronicus was conscious of this lack of support, and Theodosius was soon persuaded to retire to a monastery. He was replaced by a creature of Andronicus's, one Basil Camaterus.

Only three lives now stood in the way of his ambition, those of Manuel's widow and of Manuel's children by his two marriages. Manuel's daughter Mary or Maria was the first to go, in spite of the fact that her opposition to the previous régime had had a great deal to do with the series of events which had led to Andronicus's return to the capital. She and her husband Renier of Montferrat died suddenly. It was rumoured that poison had been the cause.

It took longer to remove the emperor's mother. A campaign began to be mounted against her, with allegations that she was plotting against the state, that she should not be allowed any part in the administration of the empire, and that if this dangerous woman were not removed, Andronicus himself would find it impossible to continue assisting the young emperor. The people of Constantinople were only too ready to join in an attack on 'the foreign woman', and after a series of demonstrations she was removed from the palace. A piece of judicial play-acting followed: she was accused before a tribunal of entering into pacts with foreign rulers, and found guilty. Shortly afterwards her son was forced to sign a sentence of death, placing his name on the document, as Nicetas tells us, 'in ink as red as blood'. Maria-Xene, formerly of Antioch, Empress of the Romans, was then strangled in her cell with a silken cord. She had lived for thirty-five years and was still very beautiful.

His next manoeuvre was to seek increased support for himself by threatening to return to his governorship of Oenaeum, contrasting the insupportable burden of his responsibilities in Constantinople with the wealth and other advantages

that awaited him if he resumed his former position. He inspired men to stir up feeling in Constantinople on his behalf; they were to persuade the people that the city would be in danger if Andronicus were not formally associated upon the throne with the young and inexperienced little emperor, the weakness of the one being balanced by the vigour of the other. Building on this, they then began to declare that Andronicus should be invited to become co-emperor, even forced to agree to this if it should happen not to be his wish, and in the end a great performance was arranged along these lines. Eustathius gives us a graphic account: a deputation appeared before Andronicus, threw themselves at his feet and begged him to accept the imperial power and to share in taking the reins of it in hand, lest, as they put it, the emperor Alexius, this young Phaethon taking charge of the chariot of the empire without the necessary skill, should bring disaster upon everything. And when they rose and released his feet, they stretched out their hands to him as if he were divine; he, on the other hand, gave an appearance of being distressed, and seemed to find even the thought of living unbearable, if he had to hear such suggestions and be, as it were, coached in infidelity. 'How could I do this?' he cried, and threatened them, saying, 'I shall exile myself, I shall take my life, if I am not left in peace.'

In the end he allowed himself to be persuaded and, still feigning reluctance, was dragged to a small church in the vicinity of the imperial palace and acclaimed as emperor. The imperial slippers were placed upon his feet, although he kept on shuffling them from side to side as he continued to pretend unwillingness, and he was adorned with the imperial diadem and robes. A more formal ceremony of coronation followed shortly afterwards in the Great Church, the Church of the Holy Wisdom.

But once he had attained imperial rank, his true nature began to show itself. He soon took precedence over Alexius on state occasions, and began to fill such offices as fell vacant with candidates of his own choosing. And within a month he had achieved his final aim: the young emperor was deposed, and a few days

later strangled with a silken cord. The corpse was then beheaded, the head hidden in a secret place, and the body, now unidentifiable, placed in a lead coffin and thrown in the Bosphorus to join the other such offerings that this stretch of water holds.

At the age of sixty-three, Andronicus had now become Emperor of the Romans. His next action, tying up loose ends, was to marry the widow of Alexius. 'Widow' is an inexact expression. Agnes was the daughter of King Louis VII of France. A dynastic marriage had been arranged at the end of Manuel's reign, and the little French princess, then only eight years old, had been brought to Constantinople, re-named Anna, installed in the palace and betrothed to the young prince. But even after he became emperor a full marriage may have been delayed in view of the extreme youth of the lad and of his destined bride. No such scruples held Andronicus back. A marriage took place before the year was out. We have no evidence that it was ever consummated, and certainly the new emperor did not lack for more mature companions, but of course the chroniclers of the time enjoyed assuming that it had been, and the thought spurred on their slavering pens.

'And he, with the stink of age upon him,' wrote Nicetas, 'was not ashamed to lie unlawfully with his nephew's pink-cheeked tender bride who had not yet completed her eleventh year, the withered suitor embracing the unripe maiden, the old man in his dotage clasping the damsel with pointed breasts, the shrivelled and languid greybeard clinging to the rosy-fingered girl dripping with the early morning dew of love.'

Eustathius, as befitted a churchman, was less specific, but also gave his imagination free rein, writing, 'and after having experienced a different kind of gentle loving, the little princess loathed the roughness of Andronicus. Sometimes, they say, she would imagine in her dreams that she saw the young Alexius, and would cry out his name, and she alone knew what she suffered.'

Spicy stuff indeed, but there is no reason to assume that Agnes-Anna had a hard time of it. It was, after all, a marriage which had been entered into for reasons of state. Andronicus did in fact offer her to his son Manuel first, and only when this offer was declined did he marry her himself. We need not suppose that by so doing he had any thought in his head except that of making sure that she would not, if left alone or married to anyone else, become a focus for rebellion. Later, when all the trouble was over and she had become his widow, she remained at the court, and subsequently became the partner of a Byzantine nobleman, Theodore Vranas.

Andronicus was now the unchallenged ruler of the Byzantine world, and during the two years of his reign his achievements were considerable. He set himself the task of eliminating corruption from government, and was in part successful. The first step was to appoint provincial governors without making them pay large sums for these appointments. It was therefore no longer essential for them to overtax the provincials in order to recoup their outlay. The tax collectors themselves were also rigorously supervised and the economic condition of the whole empire began to improve. Constantinople itself also benefited. The water supply of the capital was increased, and the Church of the Forty Martyrs was redecorated. Andronicus also had his first wife disinterred and buried in a more splendid tomb as a mark of his great respect for her. We must regret the disappearance of another of his creations, a new church at Constantinople which was decorated with a series of paintings illustrating at least some episodes of his earlier life.

But in addition to his administrative and financial reforms, he began a campaign to break the power of the military aristocracy which had for so long gone unchallenged. This led to revolts against him and refusals to accept his authority.

At the beginning of his reign he conducted several notable sieges of cities in which his opponents had installed themselves. The first was at Nicaea in

Bithynia, which was defended by Isaac Angelus, the man who had been a participant in the last reconciliation scene played between Manuel and Andronicus. During the siege Andronicus employed an Israelite stratagem, when he had Eudoxia (to be distinguished from Eudocia), the mother of Isaac Angelus, brought from Constantinople and mounted upon a battering ram, a manoeuvre which tested the aim of the defenders severely, although the lady was not harmed. When the city surrendered, Isaac Angelus was spared, a decision which cost Andronicus his life.

The city of Prusa was also captured, and since it had not surrendered it was more harshly treated. Nicetas wrote that 'he left the vines of Prusa weighed down with bodies like clusters of grapes, and forbade those who had been punished by being impaled on stakes to be taken down for burial; so, baked in the sun, they swayed in the breezes like scarecrows in a garden of cucumbers.'

It is a fact of life that remission of taxes does not bring lasting gratitude. So before long it was the harsh and repressive nature of Andronicus's government that was most felt, while his reforms were taken for granted. Men forgot these reforms, or forgot who had been responsible for them; they found it easier to remember how he treated a man who had spoken disrespectfully of him, having him publicly barbecued in the Hippodrome, the public racecourse of the city.

His popularity faded, the air was thick with plotting, and his only recourse was to institute a Tiberian régime of terror and torture. Many were executed, but some escaped to the West, and it was this that led to his downfall.

Another Alexius Comnenus, not the same person as the murdered boy-emperor, or the Protosebastus, but a nephew of the late emperor Manuel, found his way to Palermo to the palace of the Norman king, William II.

William was willing to seize any opportunity which offered itself, and this Alexius Comnenus now presented a most convenient excuse for taking action, since he was near enough to the Byzantine throne to be presented as a possible rival emperor - or could at any rate be allowed to think of himself in this way. By

coincidence another potential claimant was also brought to William's court. This was a lad who had appeared on the east coast of the Adriatic, and had then been brought to Sicily and presented in public as the emperor Alexius who, it was claimed, had not really been killed but was still alive. When Andronicus heard the news he is said to have sneered and said that the boy must have been a fine swimmer, if he could travel underwater all the way from Constantinople to Sicily, and it is equally unlikely that William was deceived, but in the circumstances any pretext for an assault on the Byzantine empire was useful.

So in June 1185 a great expedition left Messina and sailed around the foot of Italy and across the Adriatic to Dyrrachium, which was quickly captured. From there the army marched across into Greece by land, aiming for the capital of Macedonia, Thessalonica.

The fleet then sailed around the south of Greece to meet it. It arrived nine days after the army had encamped around the city, and then the siege began in earnest.

Thessalonica resisted the attack with vigour. The siege might even have failed, or at any rate lasted longer, had it not been for the failure of the Byzantine aristocracy to play their part. Andronicus sent several small armies to relieve it, but the commanders of these forces kept at a distance when a joint assault by them and by the defenders might have driven the invaders back.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that the siege was not protracted. It began in earnest on the 15th of August 1185, and on the 24th the enemy broke into the city through a gap in the weakest wall, the eastern one, after undermining it from below and attacking it with stones hurled from a huge catapult. Once the wall had collapsed the attackers, eager to loot and rape, swarmed into Thessalonica and the defenders were unable to offer any further resistance.

The fall of Thessalonica did not lead to further victories for William. He had over-extended himself, and six months later his army was defeated in Thrace. The survivors fled back to Sicily by sea.

Constantinople was not attacked, but the invasion and the panic that it caused led to the collapse of Andronicus's régime, because it revealed the weakness of his position. Although he took action to improve the defences of the city, he seems in other respects to have retreated into a paranoid state in which he suspected plotting everywhere, and ordered numerous executions. Nicetas reports that by now 'a day on which he ordered no man's death was for him a day wasted', and in addition paints the picture of a man increasingly given over to sexual excesses: 'Andronicus would have liked to emulate the thirteenth Labour of Hercules, who lay with all the fifty daughters of Thespius in a single night, but he needed to resort to artifice to restore his nerves, anointing himself with a certain balm to increase his vigour, and including in his diet the flesh of the Egyptian skink.' We cannot tell whether there may have been any truth in such rumours, but there can be no doubt that by now he was suffering from persecution mania. A month after the fall of Thessalonica he issued a decree that those who had been imprisoned or exiled on political charges, together with their families, were to be executed on the grounds of having conspired with the Norman invaders, who at that time were still in Greece.

The instruction was never carried out. Among the orders that Andronicus issued was one for the arrest of Isaac Angelus, who had been living quietly for two years since his surrender at the siege of Nicaea. He was an obvious focus for the aristocratic opposition and had been identified by a soothsayer as the successor to the throne. Isaac was uncooperative. He ran the emperor's messenger through with his sword, mounted his horse and galloped to the Great Church of the Holy Wisdom where he took sanctuary.

The news spread, crowds gathered and he found many supporters, not only among the common people but also among those other members of the

aristocracy who realised that their lives too were in danger. The next day there was a riot in the city.

The prisons were opened and the political prisoners released, and by popular assent Isaac was proclaimed Emperor of the Romans.

Andronicus was at that moment away from Constantinople. He hastened back, but when he arrived it was too late for him to attempt to regain control. Realising that all was lost, he slipped off his imperial robes and attempted to flee, accompanied by his child-bride Agnes-Anna and, practical to the last, his favourite concubine Maraptiké. Embarking on a small ship he sailed out of the Golden Horn towards the Bosphorus, hoping to reach safety on the northern shores of the Black Sea, but he was soon captured and brought back to Constantinople and delivered to the mercies of Isaac Angelus. Nicetas tells us what happened to him then.

He was thrown into prison and fettered with the kind of iron collar used for wild beasts in the amphitheatre, then paraded before the new emperor, whose courtiers slapped and kicked him, tore out his beard, knocked out his teeth and shaved his head. Then his right hand, with which he had signed so many warrants for execution, was cut off with an axe and he was sent back again into his cell.

Some days later he was taken out again and delivered to the mob. One eye was gouged out immediately; they left him the other, so that he could better observe what was happening to him. He was mounted upon a mangy camel and, in a parody of a triumphal procession, paraded through the Forum of Constantinople, looking like the leafless and withered stump of an aged tree. His head, from which the hair had been shaven and the beard plucked out, shone before everyone balder than an egg, and his body was covered only with a few rags. Persons of the lower sort came rushing from the taverns to have their sport with him. Once they had hailed him as their saviour, and sworn loyalty to him. Now some struck him on the head with clubs, others crammed dung into his

nostrils, or used sponges to pour urine into his eyes. They reviled his mother and all his forebears, they jabbed his ribs with roasting spits, they pelted him with stones and a prostitute emptied a jug of boiling water over his face. In this way, still slumped across his camel, he reached the Hippodrome, where he was suspended upside down from a stone lintel which stretched across two columns there. Still alive he moaned, 'Lord', have mercy!' and 'Why do you further bruise the broken reed?' - but he was shown no compassion. The excited mob tore his remaining clothes from him and assaulted his private parts. One man drove a sword upwards through his open mouth and throat into his body, while others stood behind him, vying with one another to see who could make the deepest slashes in his buttocks.

At last his sufferings came to an end. He died, and as he did so his mutilated right arm jerked round towards his mouth, while men jeered at him, for being a bloodsucker to the last. His life ended in the Hippodrome of Constantinople, the scene of some of the greatest Byzantine public spectacles and imperial ceremonial, in which he himself had yearned for power and exercised it; as it has been said, 'Ambition's cradle often is its grave'.

After several days his body was taken down, but Isaac refused to allow it to be placed in the Church of the Forty Martyrs, which Andronicus had restored with the intention that it should be his tomb, or even given burial of any kind. It was taken from the Hippodrome to an outlying district of the city and exposed to view in a place where, years later, it could still be seen, not completely decomposed, by those who passed by.

You may find this story horrifying and perhaps disgusting, but let us not look back on the twelfth century with any sense of superiority. It is not so many years since, in the forecourt of a petrol station in Milan in April 1945, another man of great ability who had the ambition to be a Roman emperor hung head downwards while those who had once followed him stared at his body. The parallels between the lives and deaths of Andronicus Comnenus and Benito

Mussolini are not exact, but their ⁱⁱfates illustrate the same maxim, the truth of which has often been illustrated.

He who would aspire to be Emperor of the Romans, to exercise power and enjoy the trappings of majesty, must be prepared to pay the penalty if fortune does not smile on him. In the words of the proverb, 'Take what you want, God says, and pay for it.'

ⁱ This lecture is printed here in the form in which it was delivered at a plenary session during the XVIth Biennial Conference of the Australian Association for Byzantine Studies at the University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales in April 2010. It owes much, perhaps too much, to the elegant essay 'Les aventures d'Andronic Comnène', published by Charles Diehl as Chapter IV (pp. 86-133) of the second volume of his *Figures Byzantines* (see below). The principal contemporary sources are as follows. For the emperor's earlier life, John Cinnamus (*Epitome*, ed. A. Meineke, Bonn 1836; English translation by C. Brand, *deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus*) is the best source. For the events of his reign the later historian Nicetas Choniates has the most information (*Historia*, ed. J. L. van Dieten, Berlin/New York 1975; English translation by H. Magoulias, *O City of Byzantium*, Detroit 1984). Nicetas resigned his position after Andronicus became emperor, so it is not surprising that he paints a generally negative picture of the man who seized power in such an evil fashion, and perhaps enjoyed describing his death in such graphic detail, but he found himself able to give him credit for some good actions where credit was due. For the events leading up to Andronicus's succession to the imperial throne, the account by Eustathios of the siege of Thessalonica by the Normans in 1185 is particularly valuable (*Eustazio di Tessalonica, la Espugnazione di Tessalonica, testo critico introduzione annotazioni di Stilpon Kyriakides, proemio di Bruno Lavagnini, versione italiana di Vincenzo Rotolo*, Palermo 1961, English translation by John R. Melville Jones (*Byzantyna Australiensia* 8), Canberra 1988). The second volume (*Regesten von 1025 bis 1204*) of F. Dölger's *Corpus der griechischen Urkunden des Mittelalters und der Neueren Zeit*, Munich/Berlin 1925, lists twelve references to administrative acts carried out by Andronicus as emperor, but the evidence for these is all contained in Byzantine literary texts or passing references in Venetian records, and no original documents have survived. The letters of Michael Choniates (*Michaelis Choniatae epistulae, recensuit Foteini Kolovou*, Berlin 2001) mention Andronicus on a number of occasions, always in a negative way, but without giving any information about actual events or of actions carried out by the emperor, so their only relevance in this context is to establish that they were written after Andronicus had died. The most useful modern sources are as follows, in alphabetical order of author's surname: M. Angold, *Church and State in Byzantium under the Comneni*, Cambridge 1996, L. Bréhier, 'Andronic Comnène' in *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastique*, Paris 1914, Vol. II cols. 1776-1782; F. Chalandon, *Les Comnène*, Vol. II, Paris 1912 (reprinted New York 1960) and the chapter 'The later Comneni' in the fourth volume of *The Cambridge Mediaeval History* (Cambridge 1923), pp. 379-384; F. Cognasso, 'Partiti politici e lote dinastiche a Bisanzio alla morte di Manuele Comneno' in *Memorie della Reale Accademia delle Scienze di Torino, Serie seconda t. LXII, Scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 1912,

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